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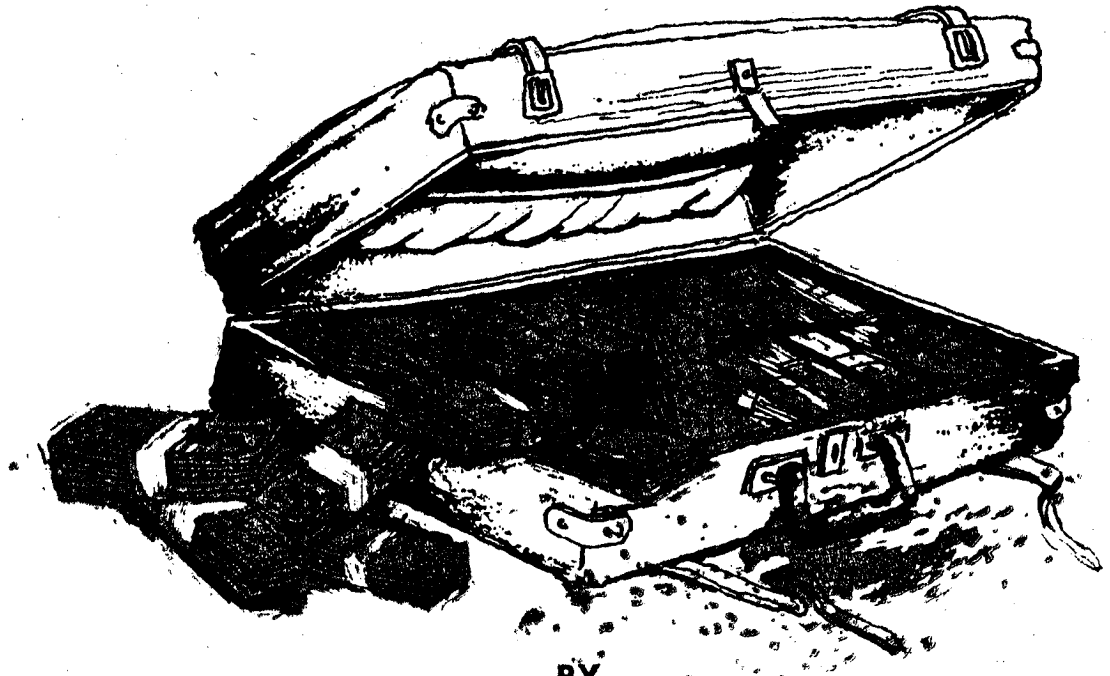
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THE QUEER DEAL



BY
JACK RITCHIE

They got the ransom money alright. A suitcase full of it. Two hundred thousand dollars in small bills . . . and all of it counterfeit.

I EXAMINED the twenty under the lamp. "It's counterfeit."

Big Ed swore and brought a handful of bills to the light. "They look all right to me."

I took a twenty from my wallet and handed it to him. "Try them side by side. There's a slight difference in the coloring and in the feel of the thing. The grain in the paper doesn't look right either."

Big Ed glared at me.

I shrugged. "How was I supposed to figure that something like this would happen? The hundreds are phony too."

Jimmy Becker left the open suitcase on the bed and joined us. "They don't look too bad—unless you got another bill handy to compare. I think we could pass them."

"It would be a long, long job," I said. "And it's not smart."

He didn't agree with me. "So we

go into a drugstore, buy a pack of cigarettes, and get the change in the real stuff."

I smiled patiently. "Small time stuff and too risky. We'd leave somebody to identify one of us with every bill we passed. We couldn't stay in any town long enough to do us much good. We'd have to keep moving. And besides that, half the money is in hundred dollar bills. Do you expect to take a hundred into a drugstore and get change?"

Big Ed crumpled his handful of bills. "So we're stuck with two hundred thousand and it's just paper. We got nothing for our troubles."

"It's not that bad."

They looked at me.

"We'll have to sell the stuff," I said.

Two weeks before, I'd scouted Pete Fargo, and when I was satisfied I'd gone back to the West Coast to pick up help.

I'd settled on Big Ed and Jim Becker.

Big Ed was heavy, with a bear-like hunch to his shoulders, and Becker was a small, tense man. The thing they had in common was not being too particular about how they made money.

In my hotel room I'd seen that they had cigars and a couple of whiskies before I did my talking. "There's fifty grand in it for each of you."

They liked that part of it fine and smiled.

Big Ed only half joked. "Who do we kill?"

"Nobody. We kidnap him."

Big Ed gave that only two seconds' thought and then put down his glass. "Count me out. I don't monkey around with things that interest the Federal boys. Everybody and his cousin would be on my neck. Not a drop of sympathy anywhere."

Becker agreed with him. "Nothing doing."

"Think about the fifty grand while I'm talking," I said. "The man we take is Pete Fargo."

Big Ed snorted. "You're worse than crazy. Fargo's a big man in the Midwest. Nobody fools with him."

Yes, Fargo was an important man. And so was his brother, Frank. In the county they called home they ran at least a half a dozen clubs, and other things, that I knew about.

"We take Pete Fargo," I said again. "And for our work, we get two hundred thousand."

Big Ed raised an eyebrow. "Your cut would be a hundred thousand?"

"I'm providing the brains."

He let that go. "Just for the sake of conversation, suppose we do take Pete Fargo. You got any plans for him after we get the money?"

"We let him go."

Big Ed pitied me. "And so he

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goes straight to the cops."
"He won't. They'll never know a thing about it." I took a newspaper clipping out of my pocket and handed it to him. "The Fargo brothers have been in a little trouble with the income tax people. Nothing serious, but enough so that they got tagged to pay a little more than they did. The Government and the Fargos have more or less settled down to calling their incomes twelve thousand dollars a year each, for the last five years. The Fargos claim that they're businessmen and they've got a small ice cream plant to prove it."

Becker laughed. "Twelve thousand a year? Everybody knows they pull in at least ten or twenty times that much every year with the set-up they have."

I smiled. "Everybody *knows*, but nobody can prove it. Especially the Government. But if the Fargos go to the police, they'd have to mention the little thing that they paid two hundred thousand dollars to get Pete back. Before they knew it, the income tax people would pay them a fast return visit and this time, because they'd have the help of the police and the Federals, they'd really dig. They'd want to know *how* the Fargos managed to raise that much money on only twelve thousand a year. Even if the Fargos lived on water, they couldn't have raised that much legitimately. And saying that they borrowed from generous friends

wouldn't be the answer. They'd have to name the friends. And the friends the Fargos have wouldn't like to be brought to the attention of the income tax people either. They wouldn't like that at all."

Big Ed worked on his cigar. "Suppose—and I'm just thinking—suppose we just dumped Fargo in the river after we got the money?"

"That would really bring the police in and we don't want that for ourselves. If we do things my way, they won't even know that anything happened. The Fargos won't tell them. They might get steaming mad, but there's nothing they can do but try to forget it."

Becker had an unpleasant thought. "What's to stop Fargo from putting his own organization on us?"

"What organization?"

He thought I was kidding. "He's got a couple of hundred people working for him."

"And you think that adds up to a couple of hundred hoods? A little army that will be searching for us?" I shook my head. "No. When you take off the waiters at his clubs, the bartenders, the croupiers, the girls, the clerks, the bookkeepers, the janitors and what have you, I doubt if you'd have more than half a dozen musclemen left—if that many. And that few can't look far. Figure it out for yourself. You think the Fargos are going to throw out money on an army of killers who just stand around ready to put

somebody away once every three or four years?"

Becker was almost convinced. "But what about the Syndicate? The way I read, the Fargos are part of it. And that stretches all over the country."

I killed that. "The big boys might get together once every ten years to shake hands, drink whiskey, and maybe settle a little territory trouble, but as an organization, it's mostly a dream. If the Syndicate was half way as organized as the papers make out, it would need a building the size of the Pentagon filled with clerks just to take care of the paperwork."

I studied their faces and they seemed about ready to go along with me. "There won't be any nation-wide search for us by the Syndicate, but even if there were, the Syndicate wouldn't know who it was looking for. We're not going to leave our calling cards. Fargo doesn't know our names and our faces can melt into the two hundred million population without any trouble."

Becker thought of something else. "How do we get to Pete Fargo? According to what I read, his home is like a fort. All kinds of alarms, gadgets, and electric eyes. We couldn't get near it. And he's supposed to have a couple of goons living with him."

Big Ed nodded. "When he travels somebody's always riding with him—somebody easy with a gun.

And we couldn't take him at one of the clubs. Too many of his people around."

"I watched him for two weeks," I said. "And I know that he's alone—if you want to call it that—a couple of nights a week. I don't know the lady's name, but when he stops at her apartment, he doesn't feel that he has to have the help of a bodyguard."

We took the next morning's plane back to the Midwest and I bought myself a car.

We picked up Pete Fargo at 3 A.M. two days later as he left his car and was about to enter his girl friend's apartment building. The three of us took him to the small cabin I'd rented about twenty miles from the city.

Fargo was a slim man, but wide-shouldered, and he wasn't showing much scare. "Well?" he demanded. "What are you punks after?"

"Two hundred thousand," I said. "And then we'll give you back to your brother."

He tried a laugh. "You got the wrong man. We don't have that kind of money."

I smiled. "The two hundred thousand is for returning all of you. If we have to cut off an ear and send that to your brother, we'll lower our asking price to one hundred and ninety thousand. Two ears, only one hundred and eighty thousand. We'll work our way down to ten thousand. There might still be some of you left."

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Fargo's eyes went over us and he was memorizing our faces. "Do you know who you're tackling?"

"We know and we're not worried about it." I put the tape recorder on the table. "We'll use this—just in case your brother doesn't believe your handwriting. Tell him not to go to the police. If he should get that silly idea, we'll send you back right away. But he might have trouble recognizing your body. We want two hundred thousand. Nothing bigger than one hundred dollar bills."

His lip dragged at a sneer. "You think he'd mark big bills?"

"I'm not worried about your brother. But the bank would keep a record of the serial numbers of bigger bills—if that's where he's going to get the cash—and I won't feel comfortable if anybody at all has a list."

I unraveled the microphone cord. "Your brother has one week to raise the money. No more. And when he has it, I want him to put an ad in the Lost and Found column of both the daily newspapers. *Lost. Wallet, Initials J.G.L. Keep cash. Please return papers.* When we see that, we'll get in touch with him about the delivery."

Fargo's eyes flickered. "What's to stop you from putting a bullet through me once you get the money?"

"Nothing. Except that we're just as anxious to keep this thing a little private affair as you are. And I

think you are. We don't want the police or anybody else in on this and they would have to be if we gave them a body. We'll kill you only if we don't get the money. We'd be mad enough for that."

I held the microphone in front of him. "Time to talk, Fargo. Give your brother a real horror story so that he'll feel sorry for you."

Fargo darkened with anger, but when I flipped the switch he began talking.

When he was done, I put the tape and a printed note in a small box and addressed it to Frank Fargo.

When Fargo's answer appeared in the Lost and Found column four days later, I phoned him from a bus depot and made the arrangements for the delivery.

He was to put the money in a suitcase and drop it in the ditch beside county trunk J a hundred feet past its junction with OC at nine the next night. Both J and OC were gravel roads in a lonely section of the country.

When I got back to the cabin, Big Ed and Becker were anxiously waiting.

"Everything's arranged," I said.

Big Ed rubbed his neck nervously. "Suppose Frank Fargo's got the place covered by a few of his boys?"

"I told him not to plan any surprises. The man we'd send to make the pick-up wouldn't know where to find us or where we kept his brother. We'd get in touch with him after he picked up the money.

But if we didn't meet him on time and alone, we'd finish off Pete and send him the pieces."

Becker frowned. "We're letting somebody else in on this?"

"No. I just used those words. I'll make the pick-up myself."

Big Ed smiled. "You *and* I will make the pick-up."

My smile was mild. "You're afraid that I won't be able to lift the suitcase by myself?"

"I just think that you might not be able to resist the temptation to keep right on traveling."

"Ed," I said. "Suppose I did cross you? What would you do about it?"

His eyes narrowed. "I'd kill you."

"What if you couldn't find me?"

He glowered. "Maybe I'd get mad enough to send the police a few hints about how you got the money. Even if it hurt me too."

"That's right," I said. "And since I know that, you can bet your teeth that I'd rather have just my hundred thousand clear and nobody looking for me than two hundred thousand and no safe place to hide."

"Could be," Ed conceded. "But I'd just as soon go with you so that you don't get tempted even for a second."

The next evening at eight, Big Ed and I parked the car on a hill about a half a mile from the intersection of J and OC, turned off our lights, and waited.

At a quarter to nine, a car pulled

off the main highway and turned onto J. We watched the beams of the headlights move slowly down the road and stop just past OC.

A big man carrying a suitcase crossed the headlights and disappeared on the side of the road. When he returned, his hands were empty.

We waited until the car turned back toward the highway and melted into the traffic before Big Ed started the engine.

He slowed down at the intersection.

"Right about here," I said.

I got out of the car with my flashlight and walked along the ditch. When I came back to the car, Ed took the suitcase impatiently. "Let's see if it's there."

He whistled softly when he snapped open the lid. "Now isn't that pretty?"

We drove around for a while to make certain we weren't being followed and then headed back to the cabin.

Becker had untied one of Fargo's arms and was letting him have a smoke.

Big Ed put the suitcase on the kitchen table and let Becker have a look.

Becker's eyes glittered. "Are you sure it's all there?"

Big Ed chuckled. "If it isn't, it's close enough. We didn't stop to count every bill."

Pete Fargo took a couple of nervous puffs on his cigarette and

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I thought I knew what he was thinking. Now that we had the money, were we really going to let him go, or did we have other plans?

I grinned. "Take it easy, Fargo. You'll be talking to your brother before midnight."

He shrugged as though he hadn't been worried at all.

"What do we do now?" Becker asked. "Drop Fargo off on the road somewhere?"

"We just leave him here and go ourselves," I said. "He'll work his way out of those ropes in an hour or so. We'd better not stick around here any longer than we can help it."

We left Fargo where he was and got into the car. We drove about ten miles to a medium-sized town and checked in at a hotel.

Big Ed put the suitcase on the bed and opened it. "Time to divide the stuff." Then he smiled. "Becker and I been thinking and we come to the agreement that the only fair thing to do is split this three ways. All even."

I looked them over. "I did all the planning."

"Maybe," Big Ed said. "But we figure the pay-off should be on the chances we took. We think they were about even all around."

Their eyes told me that they were ready to make something out of it if I got stubborn. I took a deep breath and then shrugged. "Let's start counting."

I picked up one of the packs of hundreds and riffled through it. I hesitated a moment and then slipped one of the bills from the paper band and examined it. I frowned and went to the lamp for a better look.

Big Ed and Becker stopped their counting and watched me.

"What's the matter?" Big Ed asked finally.

I didn't answer him. I got a pack of twenties from the suitcase and slipped a bill from that. I swore softly.

Big Ed and Becker stared at me.

I held the bill against the light. "It's counterfeit."

"We'll have to sell the stuff," I said. "We got rooked, but we still ought to bring something out of this. To pass those bills you need an organization—a lot of little men who cash the stuff, take their percentage, and bring back the change in good money. But we don't have an organization. If we tried shoving the queer ourselves we'd be operating as amateurs and we'd be asking to get caught. But there are organizations that can do the work for us."

Big Ed regarded the suitcase without joy. "How much could we get for this pile?"

"I don't know. Maybe thirty, forty percent. I never did that kind of business before."

Becker figured that and looked a little happy. "Sixty grand? Or

more? Where do we find an organization like that? How do we get in touch with one?"

"I wouldn't know any of the boss men myself," I said. "But I do know a passer in St. Louis. He ought to be able to get us a connection. We can give it a try."

"Start phoning," Big Ed said.

I didn't have Harry Owens' number or his address, but I did know several places where he might be at this time of the night. On my third call to St. Louis I got him at a bowling alley.

"Harry," I said. "This is Mike Randall."

"So?"

"I've got something in your line. Some merchandize I'd like to get rid of."

"Why tell me? I'm just a private in the big army. I don't free lance."

"I don't know the general. But you ought to be able to get through to him. I've got two hundred thousand units. If you can arrange the sale, you get ten percent of what I get."

There was a little silence and then, "I'll see what I can do. Where can I reach you?"

I gave him the town and the name of the hotel. "Something more, Harry. I want the meet here and tonight."

"That's asking for fast work."

"I haven't got the time to waste."

There was a little more silence. "I'll see what I can do. But I don't give orders. I just ask."

Harry called back forty minutes later. "They're going to send a buyer up there."

"When?"

"They told me right away."

"He'll have the money?"

"Sure."

"How much?"

"I don't know. It all depends on what quality stuff you got. And remember, my cut is ten percent. But don't mention that to the man you see."

It was about eleven-thirty when the knock came at the door.

He was a small man, wearing glasses, and he carried a brief case. "Mike Randall?"

"That's right." I looked him over. "What's Harry's last name?"

He smiled thinly. "Owens." His eyes went past me to Big Ed and Becker. "Your friends?"

"Partners."

He came into the room and took off his hat and topcoat. "Where's the merchandise?"

Big Ed pulled the suitcase from under the bed where we had shoved it.

The small man picked up several of the bundles and studied them casually. Then he slipped a few hundreds and a few twenties from their packs and sat down. He took a folding magnifying glass from one of his pockets.

After two or three minutes he smiled slightly. "Jim Bryant's plates made these. I recognize his work. He usually sells his stuff on the

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Pacific coast." He looked up. "By the way, he's back in prison now. Tried to pass his own work again. Some people never learn. Where did you get these?"

"We found them," I said.

The little man shrugged. He went through the rest of the stacks, taking a random bill here and there and examining it cursorily. He folded his magnifying glass. "You've got two hundred thousand there?"

"Yes."

He pursed his lips. "I can offer you twenty thousand."

Big Ed's mouth dropped. "Twenty thousand? That's only ten percent."

He nodded. "Ten percent. That's a good price. And I'm willing to offer that only because this is Bryant's work. Rather good engraver." He regarded us. "Evidently this is your first venture in this field and you may have heard that the offers go up to thirty or forty percent. You heard wrong. The average is closer to eight percent. And we pay the standard prices."

Big Ed sighed. "All right. Twenty thousand is twenty thousand."

Becker nodded glumly. "What's the sense in spending time shopping around and maybe even getting a lower price?"

The little man opened his brief case and took out a thick manilla envelope. He counted out the hundreds and when he was through the envelope was empty.

"You're sure that's *real* money?" Big Ed demanded.

The little man was mildly offended. "I assure you that those bills are the best the Government can print."

When he was gone with the suitcase, I put two thousand in an envelope and addressed it to Harry Owens. We divided the remaining eighteen thousand three ways.

Big Ed scowled as he shoved his six thousand into his pocket. "Hardly worth the chances we took."

Becker was more philosophical. "It's better than nothing."

I took off my necktie. "Let's get some sleep."

"Not me," Big Ed said. "I'm putting a little more country between me and the Fargos first."

Becker agreed with him. "I'll sleep better then, too."

"You're worrying about nothing," I said. "I'm beat and I'm staying here. And I got the car keys."

"Keep them," Big Ed snapped. "There's a bus depot across the street and I'm taking the first thing moving west."

After they left, I went to the window and watched the depot. They got a midnight bus. I didn't know where they were headed and I didn't care.

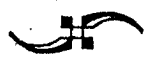
I put my necktie back on and went down to the car.

It was close to one o'clock when I found county trunk J and followed it until it hit OC.

I stopped the car and walked along the road playing the beam of the flashlight into the ditch until I found the suitcase.

There had been two suitcases.

One I had planted the night before and it had contained the two hundred thousand dollars in counterfeit money I had bought on the West Coast. That was the suitcase I had picked up earlier.



The one I now carried back to the car had been dropped by Frank Fargo and the money had to be real.

There was no sense in dividing two hundred thousand dollars three ways—if you could help it.

And best of all, nobody knew what I had done.

Nobody would be looking for me.



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